

**‘SO TERRIBLY ALTERED,
IN SO BRIEF A PERIOD:’
THE DISCOURSE OF
AGEING IN EDGAR
ALLAN POE**

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Abstract

Having recently celebrated the two-hundredth anniversary of Edgar Allan Poe's birth in the year 2009, Poe's tales still remain an invaluable source of ongoing interpretation. From the perspective of ageing studies, it can be argued that Poe underwent a premature process of ageing, focusing on evidence such as his correspondence, his concern with daguerreotypes, his constant need to lie about his age, and especially, the important role some ageing characters play in his tales. Many of Poe's short-stories feature the aged as pivotal characters, addressing issues such as physical decline in "Loss of Breath" or "The Man that was Used Up," the agony of perpetual remembrance in "The Cask of Amontillado," dementia and insanity in "The Fall of The House of Usher," the stigmatization of women's physical ageing in "The Spectacles," the traumatic interaction between patient and carer in "The Tell-Tale Heart," the isolation of the old criminal in "The Man of the Crowd," and the gradual separation between the body and the will in "The Facts in the

Resumen

Tras la celebración en el año 2009 del 200 aniversario del nacimiento de Edgar Allan Poe, sus cuentos son aún una fuente inagotable de nuevas investigaciones. Desde la perspectiva de los estudios del envejecimiento, se puede establecer que Poe sufrió un proceso de envejecimiento prematuro acudiendo a pruebas como su correspondencia, su preocupación por los daguerrotipos, su necesidad constante de mentir acerca de su edad y, especialmente, el papel destacado que alguno de sus personajes de edad avanzada juegan en sus historias. Muchas de las historias cortas de Poe muestran a los ancianos como personajes clave, haciendo referencia a temas como el declive físico en "Loss of Breath" o "The Man that was Used Up," la agonía del recuerdo continuo en "The Cask of Amontillado", la demencia y la locura en "The Fall of the House of Usher," la estigmatización del envejecimiento físico de las mujeres en "The Spectacles," la interacción traumática entre paciente y cuidador en "The Tell-Tale Heart," el aislamiento del criminal anciano en "The Man of the Crowd," y la separación gradual de cuerpo y voluntad en "The Facts in the

Case of M. Valdemar.” Poe’s concern with his own process of ageing as an individual sheds light on the discourse of ageing in nineteenth-century America, highlighting the contradictory conceptualisations held in relation to the elderly as indicative of the Puritan beliefs that praised the aged for being closer to God, as well as the Transcendentalist cult of youth that began to originate at the time. Moreover, envisioning ageing as a main focus of attention in Poe’s tales also paves the ground for reinterpreting Poe’s classic and canonical texts from a new perspective, exploring Poe’s concern about his own process of ageing through the analysis of the letters, daguerreotypes, personal papers, and especially, tales pertaining to the last years of his life.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe, fear of ageing, letters, daguerreotypes, personal papers, tales, premature ageing.

Case of M. Valdemar.” La preocupación de Poe por su propio proceso de envejecimiento como individuo arroja luz sobre el discurso del envejecimiento en el siglo XIX en América, señalando las conceptualizaciones contradictorias que se tenían en relación con los ancianos como indicadores de las creencias puritanas que alababan a los ancianos por estar más cerca de Dios, así como el culto de los Transcendentalistas por la juventud que se empezó a originar en la misma época. Además, al prestar una especial atención al envejecimiento en las historias de Poe, se abre camino a diferentes interpretaciones de los textos clásicos y canónicos de Poe desde una nueva perspectiva, a través del análisis de las cartas, daguerrotipos, documentación personal y, especialmente, las historias escritas en los últimos años de su vida.

Palabras clave: Edgar Allan Poe, miedo a envejecer, cartas, daguerrotipos, documentación personal, historias, envejecimiento prematuro.

1. AN INSIGHT INTO POE’S AGEING THROUGH HIS CORRESPONDENCE

Even by nineteenth-century standards, Poe’s death, at forty years of age, would have appeared definitely untimely. Shortly before he died, while he was in Richmond, travelling across the country, giving lectures and reciting some of his most highly-acclaimed poems, in September 1849, he wrote a letter to his aunt and mother-in-law, Maria Clemm, acknowledging the popularity he had lately acquired, stating that “[t]he papers here are praising me to death –and I have been received everywhere with enthusiasm” (Poe: September 18, 1849). In the same letter, he also made reference to his renewed engagement to his youth sweetheart, Sarah Elmira Royster Shelton, confessing that he intended to get married before

leaving Richmond, even if admitting nothing had been settled yet at that stage. Likewise, Poe had also been engaged in attempting to establish his own magazine, and had managed to gain the support of the wealthy and reputed editor Edward Howard Norton Patterson who, in a letter dated August 1849, accepted to help Poe in his endeavours claiming: "If you are sure that, as you before thought, 1,000 subscribers can be obtained who will pay upon receipt of the first number, then you may consider me pledged to be with you in the undertaking" (Poe: August 21, 1849).

Bearing in mind these praising comments and optimistic prospects, it could be argued that, during the months prior to his death, Poe indulged in a remarkably blissful situation both personally and professionally. Nonetheless, a closer-reading of these letters, together with others Poe wrote during the same period of time, allows for a rather bleaker picture than may be expected at first sight, thus showing that Poe's apparently confident and cheerful spirits as well as his outstanding hyperactivity at that time were merely a mirage. His apparently youthful ambition in establishing his own periodical and getting married again when he was almost forty years of age remains in sharp contrast with his weakness and poor health during the last months of his life, thus underlining a premature process of ageing due to Poe's dissolute habits, economic constraints and hectic life, and thus showing that his eagerness to live fast and regain youth was counteracted by a premature process of ageing. As the narrator states in Poe's seminal tale "The Fall of the House of Usher," Poe, in clear resemblance with Roderick Usher, seemed 'so terribly altered, in so brief a period.'

Poe's repeatedly reassuring remarks about his professional success often came hand in hand with periods of serious illness, poignant despair and mental instability. Even though it must be admitted that Poe was rather prone to exaggeration, and to turn his life into fiction and vice versa, it must be acknowledged Poe felt constantly concerned about his health, both physically and mentally, thus often betraying a sort of hypochondriac turn. In that respect, in the series of letters he exchanged with Edward Howard Norton Patterson during the summer preceding his death, Poe gave account of his continuous trips, his restless condition due to an itinerant existence, as well as his permanent exposure to the cholera, thus stating that, on his way from New York to Richmond, he had been "arrested in Philadelphia by the Cholera, from which [he] barely escaped with life" (Poe: July 19, 1849). Poe's weak condition at the time seems evident as he further stated he had "suffered worse than death – not so much from the Cholera as from its long-continued consequences in debility and congestion of the brain" (*ibid.*: August 7, 1849).

As well as constantly referring to ill-health in his letters to Edward Howard Norton Patterson, Poe adopted a significant confessional tone through his correspondence with his aunt and mother-in-law Maria Clemm during this particularly hectic period of his life. Poe's suspicion that he might have contracted cholera is also echoed in a letter to Maria Clemm; the first of a series of letters in which Poe dramatically disclosed his low spirits as well as his poor health, confessing "I have been so ill – have had the cholera, or spasms quite as bad, and can now hardly hold the pen", even going as far as to state "I must die, I have no desire to live since I have done 'Eureka'" (Poe: July 7, 1849), thus giving account of his pessimistic prospects and lack of motivation. Poe's continuous references to his sickness became pervasive and even obsessive in his letters to his aunt, constantly repeating he felt seriously ill. On July 14, 1849, he even wrote two letters to his aunt on the very same day; in one of them, revealing his emotional dependence on Maria Clemm, stating that "when I am away from you I am too miserable to live" (*ibid.*: July 14, 1849), and in another one, addressing his aunt in the following terms: "Oh, Mother, I am *so* ill while I write" (*ibid.*: July 14, 1849). Only a few days later, Poe wrote another particularly tale-telling letter to his aunt revealing both his moodiness and even mental instability, as the following confession asserts: "For more than ten days I was totally deranged, although I was not drinking one drop; and during this interval I imagined the most horrible calamities" (*ibid.*: July 19, 1849). These letters reveal Poe's trauma during the last year of his life, striving to succeed both professionally and personally, struggling to establish his own periodical and become engaged to be married again, but inevitably remaining a haunted and tormented individual, in spite of any apparently alluring prospects. In his letters, Poe constantly presented himself as a troubled individual, weakened by mental anguish and physical exhaustion.

Poe's health problems and psychological disorders were also aggravated by his ever-lasting dependence on female affection, especially since his wife's demise in 1847. Even though Poe was engaged to Sarah Elmira Royster Shelton at the moment of his death, and he acknowledged his affection for her in a letter to Maria Clemm, he also revealed his low spirits as regards this imminent marriage in the following terms: "I confess that my heart sinks at the idea of this marriage. I think, however, that it will certainly take place and that immediately" (*ibid.*: September 10, 1849). Actually, apart from courting his youth's sweetheart Sarah Elmira Royster Shelton again in his adulthood, Poe also intimated with other women during the last months of his life, among them, Sarah Helen Whitman, and especially, Annie Richmond, for whom Poe developed a special affection to the extent he asserted that, despite his prospective marriage to Sarah Elmira, he should live somewhere where he could still remain near Annie, as he

confessed in one of his numerous letters to his aunt Maria Clemm months prior to his death (*ibid.*: August 28, 1849).

Poe’s personal correspondence at this stage, only a few months before his death, reveals his mental anguish, his poor health and his emotional dependence on his aunt and mother-in-law, as well as on the different prospective wives that would make up for the terrible loss of his wife Virginia only two years earlier. Maria Clemm, his aunt and mother-in-law, bore witness to Poe’s calamities at the end of his life, becoming the only person Poe seemed to trust, as he developed a sort of emotional dependence, often addressing her as ‘Mother’. Owing to both sentimental and economic dependence, in November 1848, Poe even attempted to take his own life with an overdose of laudanum when Sarah Helen Whitman firstly rejected his proposal of marriage, although they became engaged scarcely one week later, even if only for a very short period of time, as her family disapproved of the marriage.

2. VIRTUAL TESTIMONIES OF AGEING: POE’S DAGUERREOTYPES

Poe’s dissolute habits and emotional dependence began to grow more acute during Virginia’s long illness. As Michael J. Deas argues, a chronological viewing of Poe’s numerous daguerreotypes shows “the final years of Poe’s life were characterised by a rapid decline” (1989:6) for the most part. According to Michael J. Deas, Poe sat for his daguerreotype portrait at least on six occasions so as to produce a total of eight known original plates, which in turn were duplicated shortly after his death, producing as many as thirteen copy daguerreotypes. It is significant to notice that, during the last years of his life, Poe was taken numerous daguerreotypes, especially when he was courting different women so as to provide them with his picture as a sort of memento. Poe’s fondness of daguerreotypes allows the possibility of gaining insight into the changes his countenance progressively underwent at the time, thus corroborating Michael J. Deas’ remarks about Poe’s rapid process of ageing as he often looked more aged than he actually was.

Poe’s fast decline into ageing becomes particularly outstanding regarding Poe’s daguerreotypes taken during the last two years of his life. Poe’s picture known as the ‘Whitman’ daguerreotype –named after Sarah Helen Whitman, Poe’s fiancée at the time, precisely because it belonged to her– is presumed to have been taken in Richmond in 1848, when he was thirty-nine years old.

Likewise, Poe's daguerreotype known as 'Ultima Thule,' which also belonged to Sarah Helen Whitman, was taken in Providence, Rhode Island, in November 1848, four days after Poe had attempted to commit suicide; its title making reference to a Latin epithet firstly used by the ancient Greek historian Polybius to designate the furthest regions of the habitable world, which are mentioned in Poe's poem entitled "Dream-Land". Sarah Helen Whitman believed it was an appropriate name for that picture owing to the gloomy circumstances surrounding its creation. In relation to both the 'Whitman' and 'Ultima Thule' daguerreotypes, Sarah Helen Whitman admitted that Poe's likeness was outstanding in the 'Ultima Thule' portrait, whereas stated that the 'Whitman' daguerreotype did not represent him truly. Taking Sarah Helen Whitman's words into consideration in relation to Poe's differing countenance in both pictures, a comparative analysis of these two daguerreotypes, even though both were taken in 1848, reveals Poe's remarkably different appearance, showing he had grown significantly aged within a very short span of time. In the 'Whitman' daguerreotype, Poe is wearing the same greatcoat as in the 'McKee' daguerreotype of 1843 –the greatcoat that wrapped Virginia in the final days of her illness in 1847– and despite his receding hair, he mostly looks his age, adopting a confident and gentle pose. As a matter of fact, the 'Whitman' daguerreotype is used as the frontispiece of John Ingram's edition of *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, published in 1874-75, and is currently located in the collection of the Brown University Library. In sharp contrast, in the 'Ultima Thule' daguerreotype (Deas 1989:36), Poe's countenance reveals his suffering after his attempted suicide, showing a profuse forehead and a haggard countenance, as well as looking both grave and sombre, like a tragic romantic poet, and significantly more aged in comparison to the 'Whitman' daguerreotype. Regarding Sarah Helen Whitman's words, if the 'Ultima Thule' portrait presented a remarkable likeness to Poe, it can be argued that Poe aged prematurely in a significantly short period of time.

It is also important to notice that during the last two years of his life, numerous daguerreotypes of Poe were taken, thus chronicling and giving evidence of his increasingly ageing process. Poe's picture known as the 'Annie' daguerreotype (Deas 1989:47), which is currently owned by the J. Paul Getty Museum, was taken at a sitting held in Lowell, Massachusetts, during the summer prior to Poe's death, and one of these two originals was given to Poe's beloved Mrs Annie Richmond, whereas the other was eventually given to the poet Stella Lewis, thus becoming known as the 'Stella' daguerreotype (*ibid.*:51). In these two portraits, Poe presents a remarkably rejuvenated look, especially in comparison with the 'Ultima Thule' daguerreotype, taken shortly after his attempted suicide. Nonetheless, Poe still looks haggard, exhausted, and very different from the complacent look he showed in the 'Whitman' portrait.

Poe's two final portraits were taken by the daguerreotypist William Abbott Pratt in Richmond in 1849, scarcely three weeks before Poe's death. The first of these portraits, the 'Thompson' daguerreotype (Deas 1989:54), which is currently owned by Columbia University, was named after John R. Thompson, who had known Poe, had lectured on him, and eventually became the possessor of this daguerreotype. It shows Poe in his habitual pose, all in black, and with his hand in a sling, denoting some sort of weakness, but also emphasizing a habitual dignity. The 'Traylor' daguerreotype (*ibid.*:58) was taken on the same occasion and scarcely differs from the 'Thompson' daguerreotype. However, the latter portrait acquires a significant meaning in Poe's biography. Sarah Elmira Royster Shelton, Poe's fiancée at the time, on learning about the news of Poe's death, called at the studio of William Pratt to obtain as a memento one of the two daguerreotypes of Poe. Upon Sarah Elmira Royster Shelton's death in 1888, the daguerreotype passed on her heirs and was ultimately acquired by Robert Lee Traylor, a collector of Poe memorabilia, after whom this daguerreotype was eventually named. Even though Poe's countenance does not reflect Poe's ageing as severely as in the 'Ultima Thule' daguerreotype, the last of Poe's daguerreotypes, taken a few weeks prior to his death, still displayed acute traces of his premature ageing. Despite the fact Poe's arrival in Richmond, the city where he had spent most of his youth, exerted a sort of rejuvenating effect, his countenance showed blatant signs of dissolute habits, perpetual economic constraints and ever-lasting emotional turmoil.

In scarcely two years, Poe was taken six different original daguerreotypes which were subsequently turned into several variants. Taking into account Poe was taken eight different daguerreotypes all through his lifetime, it is significant to notice most of them were taken scarcely two years prior to his death. Moreover, even if daguerreotypes were expensive and his economic problems were fairly evident, Poe seemed particularly fond of them, and especially, interested in giving his female friends these daguerreotypes as a sort of memento which would ensure some sort of permanence even after he was no more. In this respect, it has been acknowledged both Sarah Helen Whitman and Sarah Elmira Royster Shelton kept Poe's daguerreotypes until their respective deaths. Likewise, it can also be argued Poe's numerous daguerreotypes shortly before his death show he was growing rather concerned about his appearance and the physical changes he was increasingly undergoing. In that respect, Poe's use of daguerreotypes became an attempt to challenge the passage of time and its ultimate effects.

As a matter of fact, the process whereby daguerreotypes came into being can also be enlightening in that respect. Each daguerreotype plate was singular, as no negative was involved in its production, but rather, the image of the sitter was

projected through a lens directly onto a light-sensitive sheet of copper, which was inserted into the camera by hand. As a result, the image of the sitter was thrown onto the daguerreotype plate laterally reversed, thus producing a mirror image of the subject. Consequently, as Michael J. Deas claims, most of Poe's daguerreotypes are reversed images which depict the author as if in a mirror (1989:9). The means to replicate a daguerreotype was to remove the original plate, placing it on a copying board and photographing the original image again so that the mirror-reversal effect would be redoubled in the process, and therefore, a corrected image of the sitter would be eventually produced. Hence, nineteenth-century daguerreotypes were forerunners of contemporary photographs, but clearly produced reversed or mirror images, and thus, they necessarily had to be duplicated in order to produce a genuine picture of the individual. The apparent, but not entirely authentic, picture of the sitter that daguerreotypes produced may shed light on Poe's contemporary differing opinions about his likeness in the daguerreotypes he was taken all through his life. In this respect, Sarah Helen Whitman went as far as to assert the 'Whitman' daguerreotype was not an accurate picture of Poe in as far as his likeness was concerned. Hence, daguerreotypes were ultimately virtual samples of genuine images, as they offered a realistic image which was not truly authentic. The reversal phenomenon involved in the production of daguerreotypes contributed to accentuating the notorious asymmetry of Poe's face, which was mainly deemed indicative of the lack of Poe's moral character according to nineteenth-century phrenology. Nonetheless, not only did this reversal phenomenon contribute to emphasising the asymmetry of Poe's face but it may also be claimed that this asymmetry further contributed to endowing Poe with a significantly older expression.

3. PRETENCE AS A REFLECTION OF POE'S PERSONAL CONCERN ABOUT AGEING

Not only do Poe's letters and daguerreotypes shed light on Poe's process of ageing, but a careful analysis of some of his personal papers also reveals Poe's unconscious, but latent, concern about premature ageing. Born amid precarious circumstances, Poe was adopted by the Allans soon after his mother's demise, and even if born from an English actress and an American actor, Irish in origin, Poe could have well envisioned a steady and even complacent existence during his childhood and early adulthood. Nonetheless, these alluring prospects were soon drawn to a halt when Poe was disinherited when he turned twenty years of age,

and felt compelled to earn a living of his own. Poe bore witness to his bleak situation which stood in sharp contrast with the lifestyle to which he had grown used in the Allans' household. Deprived of such comfortable standard of living, Poe began his struggle to succeed as a writer, editor and journalist at a significantly young age. Under such circumstances, Poe would always remain caught between perpetual economic constraints and his strife to become a self-made man. After a buoyant childhood, Poe had to age fast to tackle his new situation, and it was precisely at this stage that he began to be concerned about ageing and even lie with regard to his true age.

Poe was born in Boston in 1809, even though, until 1880, most biographies claimed that he was born in 1811. It can be argued that Poe was the only person to blame for this misunderstanding, as he lied about his age on several occasions through his life, pretending he was younger or older depending on the circumstances. In his youth, Poe often stated that he was fairly older than he actually was. As a case in point, when Poe enlisted in the United States Army in 1827, he claimed he was twenty-two years of age, when he was actually scarcely eighteen. However, according to James A. Harrison, a fellow cadet at West Point, named T.W.Gibson, admitted that Poe appeared to be "much older than his actual twenty-one years" (1902:86), especially as regards his worn and discontented look, which was "not easily forgotten by those who were intimate with him" (*ibid.*). Obviously, Gibson seemed to be totally unaware that Poe was actually much younger than he declared to be, thus corroborating the ongoing difference between Poe's ageing appearance and his actual age even during his youth.

Nonetheless, that was not the only occasion on which Poe lied about his age. If he had pretended to be older during his youth at West Point, as he grew older, it was often the case he pretended to be younger. In 1841, Rufus Wilmot Griswold, who would eventually become the editor of Poe's works, asked the Bostonian writer to provide him with an autobiographical note for his upcoming anthology entitled *The Poets and Poetry of America*, published in 1842. In the manuscript of this memorandum (*Poe's Miscellanea*, May 29, 1841), Poe himself ascertained he was born in January 1811, despite the fact he had actually been born two years before, thus claiming himself to be younger than he actually was.

Some years later, in a letter also addressed to Rufus Wilmot Griswold, Poe modified his age even further, stating he was four years younger than he actually was, thus claiming: "It is a point of no great importance –but, in one of your editions, you have given my sister's age instead of mine. I was born December 1813 –my sister January 1811" (*Poe's Letters*, May 1849). Poe's insistence on faking his actual age cannot possibly be random, as he carefully draws Griswold's attention to it, serving the purpose of rendering himself slightly younger, and

therefore, revealing a growing concern about his process of ageing. As a result of Poe's statement, most obituaries, published in the press shortly after Poe's death, claimed Poe died at thirty-eight years of age, as is the case of *The Sun*, which argued "[h]e was in the 38th year of his age" (Hobson Quinn 1998:644), or the *Clipper*, which stated he was "aged 38 years" (*ibid.*). Since Rufus Wilmot Griswold also accepted Poe's statement as regards his age, most of Poe's posthumous biographies also claimed he had been born in 1811, and it was not until the 1880s, this inaccuracy was finally identified and correspondingly amended.

Some years before, in 1836, Poe had also played an important role so as to conceal his wife's age in their certificate of marriage. As established in the matrimony bond of Edgar Allan Poe and Virginia Clemm filed in Richmond, Poe requested Thomas Cleland to make an oath and declare Virginia was "of the full age of twenty-one" (Hobson Quinn 1998:252) years old at that time, when actually she was only thirteen when she got married. Even though Poe's and Cleland's forgery of Virginia's age mainly responded to ensuring the validity of the marriage, this falsification also contributed to shortening the outstanding age difference between Edgar and Virginia, since he was thirteen years her senior. Age disparity may have exerted an important effect on Poe and the kind of relationship he maintained with his wife, who was scarcely in her adolescence when they got married. Virginia's death, which took place when she was twenty-four and Poe was thirty-seven years of age, was especially disruptive for Poe, given his wife's outstanding youth, as Virginia's premature demise inevitably rendered Poe's premature process of ageing more evident, both literally and metaphorically.

Virginia's childlike appearance contributed to granting Poe virtual youth, and conversely, her absence became pivotal to unleash Poe's process of ageing as a clear reminder of death and decay, as well as a marker of the inexorable passage of time, especially given his wife's outstanding youth. Significantly enough, the only remaining daguerreotype of Virginia was taken immediately after her death in a last attempt to preserve her alive, literally resembling the artist's wife in Poe's tale "The Oval Portrait," published in 1842, five years prior to Virginia's death. Likewise, the emotional symbiosis developed between Poe and Virginia is fairly reminiscent of the relationship established between Roderick and Madeline in Poe's tale "The Fall of the House of Usher," published in 1839, in which Madeline's gradual decay also inevitably exerts a terrible influence on Roderick, which leads them to extinction. Moreover, Virginia's death at such a young age inevitably reminded Poe of the death of other beautiful and beloved women in his lifetime, as was the case with his own mother, Elizabeth Arnold, or the first

woman with whom Poe was ever believed to become infatuated, Jane Stith Stanard, the mother of one of Poe's classmates in Richmond.

Likewise, in comparison with his wife, Poe may have felt particularly aged and having to face gossip about their age difference, thus ultimately developing some sort of ageing complex or fear of growing older. As shown, Poe's uneasy attitude towards ageing can be detected through a careful analysis of his personal letters and his autobiographical notes, which underline his worry about not revealing his true age, especially towards the end of his life. Nonetheless, it is precisely in his fiction, and particularly, in his tales, that Poe's reflections on ageing emerge more conspicuously. Poe's concern also seems symptomatic of his contemporary cultural tenets about the process of ageing. According to the American historian David Hackett Fischer (1978), in terms of the social and cultural perceptions about ageing in the United States, the first half of the nineteenth-century was mainly regarded as a period of gerontophobia, despite the latent legacy of Puritanism, whereby the elderly were held in high esteem as presumed to be closer to God and considered embodiments of authority and hierarchy. In sharp contrast with this Puritan legacy, Transcendentalist writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were considered to make a cult of youth, praising values often attached to young citizens such as self-confidence and strength.

4. AGEING IN FICTION: POE'S AGED SELF AS A DOUBLE

A cautious examination of Poe's tales published soon after his marriage up to his wife Virginia's death shows that ageing and aged characters became a mostly pervasive topic in his fiction. When Poe was in his thirties, which was also the period during which he was most prolific and actively engaged in writing, Poe published a series of tales featuring aged characters who were either the protagonists and narrators of the stories or rather played an important role in the development of the plot. In these tales, Poe often dwelled upon themes that are closely related to the effects of ageing such as physical decline, painful remembrance, dementia and insanity, the stigmatisation of aged women, the traumatic interaction between an aged patient and his carer, and the isolation of aged individuals. Likewise, these different subjects were tackled through manifold approaches such as sardonism, cynicism, tragedy, grotesqueness, and even horror. The aged character in Poe's tales often plays the role of the narrator's

double, as he becomes his alter ego as well as his nemesis, thus involving Poe's aged characters can ultimately be regarded as the narrator's not totally accepted aged self as well as Poe's embodiment of his fear of ageing.

After having been disinherited at twenty, Poe began to undergo economic constraints and indulge in dissolute habits, suffering from exhaustion and restlessness given his new and rather dreary prospects. An early and illustrative example of this condition is Poe's tale "Loss of Breath" published in 1832, when Poe was twenty-three years of age, which introduces the metaphor of premature burial and explores the effects of ageing inasmuch as it dwells upon the gradual separation established between the decaying body and the individual will. This narrative focuses on the just married Lackobreath, who gradually realises he is beginning to lose his breath. His condition gradually worsens until, on one occasion, a surgeon even certifies his death. The narrator's realisation that his breathing capacity has significantly weakened is described in the following terms: "Yes! breathless. I am serious in asserting that my breath was entirely gone. I could not have stirred with it a feather if my life had been at issue, or sullied even the delicacy of a mirror. Hard fate" (Poe 1978:63). This tale, even if sardonic in its tone, becomes an early exponent of Poe's fear of being buried before due time, and thus of ageing prematurely. Critics such as Scott Peeples, following Marie Bonaparte's seminal work, have already noticed the protagonist of "Loss of Breath" reflects Poe's fear or awareness of his own impotence (Peeples 2004:41). However, this impotence could be interpreted in a broader way, thus referring to Poe's general weakness and inability to cope with his oppressive situation both mentally and physical due to a process of premature ageing.

When Poe turned thirty years of age, in 1839, he published one of his most well-known pieces, "The Fall of the House of Usher," which tackles the effects ageing bestows upon the individual from a tragic perspective, given the sense of gloom and damnation that pervades all through the tale. Poe also explores premature burial and the deceitful relation between the body and the will in transient states such as catalepsy through the character of Madeline Usher. From the point of view of the narrator of the tale, the accurate description of Roderick Usher reveals an exact portrait of the effects that ageing brings about. When the narrator sets eyes on Roderick for the first time since their youth, he cannot help but admit "[s]urely, man had never before so terribly altered, in so brief a period, as had Roderick Usher! It was with difficulty that I could bring myself to admit the identity of the wan being before me with the companion of my early boyhood" (Poe 1978:398). Subsequently, the narrator also proffers a detailed description of the effects of ageing on his friend, thus stating:

He suffered much from a morbid acuteness of the senses; the most insipid food was alone endurable; he could wear only garments of certain texture; the

odours of all flowers were oppressive; his eyes were tortured by even a faint light; and there were but peculiar sounds, and these from stringed instruments, which did not inspire him with horror. (Poe 1978:403)

Along with his friend's terribly altered features, the narrator also perceives that all of Roderick Usher's senses have become more acute with time, ultimately leading him to suffer from a mental disorder, which urges him to bury his twin sister Madeline while she is still alive. The symbiosis established between both siblings ultimately involves Roderick's illness as a reflection of Madeline's own weakness, as Madeline's poor health reminds Roderick of their inevitable ending as the last members of a race. In this respect, J. Gerald Kennedy has referred to the "condition of death-in-life that anticipates the House of Usher" (Kennedy 1987:25), which mainly epitomises old age, corruption and decay.

Making use of an entirely different tone, Poe also published "The Man That Was Used Up" in 1839; a grotesque piece which unfolds the physical decay of a highly-esteemed soldier, known as General John A.B.C. Smith, and debunks the myth of the self-made man (Peeples 2004:114), as the servant needs to literally reassemble his master's body parts. The narrator of the tale believes the general to be one of the most remarkable men of his age; generally admired for his good looks and outstanding shape. Looking forward to meeting the general, the narrator decides to pay him an unexpected visit. Nonetheless, instead of meeting the general in his alluring outfit, the narrator rather encounters a mass of human tissue lying on the floor, which the narrator eventually manages to identify as the general deprived of all his garments. As the narrator sarcastically admits, "[t]here was a large and exceedingly odd-looking bundle of something which lay close by my feet on the floor, and, as I was not in the best humor in the world, I gave it a kick out of the way" (Poe 1978:386). Subsequently, the narrator observes how the general's valet, Pompey, assembles his master, piece by piece, amalgamating the general's artificial legs, arms, shoulders and chest together with a wig, a glass eye and some false teeth, which ultimately contribute to shaping the general's outstanding and youthful appearance, and thus concealing, as the title reads, a rather used up man.

Drawing on a grotesque tone as well, Poe's less known tale "Why the Little Frenchman Wears His Hand in a Sling," published in 1840, unfolds a comic monologue whereby an Irish baronet, Sir Patrick O'Grandison, explains why an old French man must wear his arm in a sling. Both Sir Patrick and the old French man begin a competition as suitors of a widow, Misstress Tracle. On one occasion, both visit the widow and sit on each side of her, putting an arm around her back to clasp what they believe to be her arm on the other side. Each of them compete with each other and feel confident to have captured the lady's heart. However, as the widow arises, they realise they have been squeezing each other's

arms instead of the widow's hand. As a result of this terrible misunderstanding and seeking to take revenge, Sir Patrick injures the old Frenchman, thus showing why he must wear his left hand in a sling. This romantic and significantly ironic competition between the narrator and an old French man underlines the fight between double figures who, regardless of their blatant rivalry, ultimately become strikingly alike. The narrator's physical and psychological struggle with his aged self, embodied by the old French man, becomes foretelling as it would recur in subsequent tales.

In addition to describing physical decay and mental disorders as a result of ageing as well as physical and psychological fights with his aged self, Poe also dwelled upon the isolation and stigmatisation with which the aged were often associated. In this respect, his well-known tale "The Man of the Crowd," published in 1840, when Poe was in his early thirties, unfolds how the narrator sits in a coffeehouse, observing a busy street in London, when his attention is focused on "a decrepit old man, [of] some sixty-five or seventy years of age" (Poe 1978:511). The narrator notices that, whenever the old man moves away from the crowd, he gasps for some breath. In the accurate description the narrator provides of the Londoners, the old man seems to defy any attempt at classification, and that is precisely why the narrator feels the irresistible need to pursue him along the streets of the metropolis. The narrator finally proclaims the old man "is the type and genius of deep crime" (Poe 1978:515), refusing to resume the scrutiny of the old man as he proves to be too puzzling for the narrator. As J. Gerald Kennedy argues, the key point of the tale is that the narrator fails to see and recognise himself in his double (Kennedy 1987:118), and therefore, the narrator refuses to see himself as an old man. This actual fusing of identities between the narrator and the old man, despite the narrator's unawareness or reluctance to admit such doubling, hints at Poe's fear of identifying himself as an old man.

Poe's tale "The Descent into the Maelström," published in 1841, can also be interpreted from the perspective of ageing, as it focuses on an elderly-looking man unfolding the tortuous adventure he experienced when his ship was pulled into a great whirlpool in the ocean while he was fishing with his brothers. As a result of this extenuating event, the narrator confesses "[y]ou suppose me a very old man – but I am not. It took less than a single day to change these hairs from a jetty black to white, to weaken my limbs, and to unstring my nerves, so that I tremble at the least exertion, and am frightened at a shadow" (Poe 1978:578). This description of an aged character, clearly reminiscent of Roderick Usher, also underlines Poe's recurrent insistence on individuals becoming aged prematurely.

Likewise, when Poe turned thirty-four years of age, he published "The Tell-Tale Heart;" a horror tale of revenge and murder that can be interpreted as an

allegory of ageing. When Poe wrote this tale, his wife Virginia had already broken a blood-vessel while sitting at the piano, and from then onwards, her health seriously declined, as she succumbed to the first stages of consumption. Poe developed a sort of symbiotic existence as he took care of his young, but invalid, wife during the last days of her life. This relation of mutual dependence is also echoed in Poe's tale, in which a restless narrator, suffering from a mental disorder, unfolds he was in charge of taking care of an old man, whom he murdered when he could no longer bear the pervasive presence of his Evil Eye. Despite the murder committed, the narrator unceasingly repeats he loved the old man, and yet, he grew obsessed with the old man's eye as it embodied the perpetual vigilance to which the carer was subjected. The narrator gradually became restless due to the fact his existence was permanently devoted to the care of his senior, and he also felt perpetually invigilated upon by the old man's eye. Nonetheless, despite the old man's death, the narrator is still able to hear his beating heart as a result of guilt. Consequently, even though the narrator has been released from his duty as the carer of an old person, he realises he has developed a sort of dependency on his patient, as his existence was inextricably linked to that of the old man. Ironically, although the narrator felt the old man was totally dependent on him, he finally realises his own existence was so inextricably linked to that of the old man that, after the death of the old man, the narrator realises his existence no longer seems to have a purpose. In this respect, this interpretation corroborates Scott Peeples' reading of Poe's tale referring to the fact the narrator fails to recognise his double in the old man, and the dependence of carer onto patient and vice versa is what ultimately leads to murder. In Peeples' words, the "unacknowledged projection of self-on-other motivates the murder" (2004:75), thus showing the narrator destructs his old self as he fails to recognise himself in the old man despite the clear dependence on one another.

In 1844, five years prior to his death, Poe published "The Premature Burial," through which he recurrently dwelled upon his fear of an untimely interment even if by means of a rather grotesque and sardonic tale. The agonic image of a premature burial and the unbearable fear of being buried before due time also underlines the metaphor of aging prematurely, thus growing old before the individual actually gains insight into his own process of ageing. Likewise, Poe also provided a grotesque and even humorous portrait of female ageing in his less renowned tale entitled "The Spectacles," which was also published in the same year. On this occasion, Poe's tale unveils the experience of Simpson whose vain refusal to wear 'spectacles,' namely eye-glasses, leads him to marry his eighty-two-year-old grandmother, whom he had previously met at the theatre. Simpson soon grows deeply infatuated with Madame Lalande until she asks him to wear

spectacles, when he truly sets eyes on his wife for the very first time, thus stuttering:

What, in the name of every thing hideous, did this mean? Could I believe my eyes? –*could I?*– that was the question. Was that –was that– was that *rouge*? And were those –and were those– were those *wrinkles*, upon the visage of Eugénie Lalande? And oh! Jupiter, and every one of the gods and goddesses, little and big! –what– what –what– *what* had become of her teeth? I dashed the spectacles violently to the ground. (Poe 1978:911)

Despite this grotesque portrait of an aged woman, Madame Lalande ultimately succeeds in teaching his grandson not to trust first impressions, even though the tale often underscores the stigmatization of elderly women, especially as Simpson fell in love with Madame Lalande because he believed her to be much younger than she actually was.

Poe's "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" is probably the tale that best provides an uncanny portrait of the effects of illness on the elderly individual, placing emphasis on the gradual separation between the body and the will. In Poe's tale, Valdemar, whose death is fast approaching, agrees to be mesmerised at the moment of death. Thus, while his body is inert, his volition is utterly suspended and at the command of the narrator, a professional mesmerist. Poe had also explored other similar physical conditions and transient states in previous tales, as is the case with catalepsy in "The Fall of the House of Usher" or metempsychosis in "Morella". However, in "The Facts of the Case of M. Valdemar," the mesmerised patient is described as fairly old, thus specifically highlighting features pertaining to the aged such as "the whiteness of his whiskers, in violent contrast to the blackness of his hair –the latter, in consequence, being very generally mistaken for a wig" (Poe 1978:1234). Valdemar's mesmerised condition *in articulo mortis* enables the narrator to explore the boundaries separating life from death, and yet, his scientific ambition prevents Valdemar from dying a peaceful death, thus experiencing the agonic condition which follows the artificial separation of body and will, as his body inevitably decomposes once his will is no longer at the mesmerist's command.

Finally, soon before Virginia's demise, Poe published "The Cask of Amontillado" in 1846. In this particular case, even though the narrator, Montresor, never reveals his actual age, he confesses, towards the end of his narrative, that Fortunato's remains have been lying in his vaults "for the half of a century [and] no mortal has disturbed them" (Poe 1978:1263). This disquieting revelation implies that, even though Montresor murdered Fortunato fifty years before, he still feels the constant need to retell his deeds, thus betraying his inability to forget painful memories in his old age. Montresor's confession

therefore arises as a result of guilt, vividly repeating his deed in detail, and ultimately, unveiling Fortunato's murder did not bring the purported effect, as Montresor's attempt at taking revenge only served the purpose of worsening his mental condition.

CONCLUSIONS

In the span of eleven years, from his marriage to Virginia Clemm until his wife's demise in 1847, Poe published a series of tales that clearly addressed the topic of ageing in terms of physical decay, mental agony, the isolation and stigmatisation of the aged, the premature process of ageing, the mutual dependence established between an aged individual and his carer, the growing separation between the aged body and the human will, as well as the painful memories that last for a lifetime and significantly grow more acute in old age. The pervasive presence of ageing and aged characters in the tales Poe published during this span of time underlines Poe's concern about his own process of ageing, especially owing to factors such as the outstanding age difference established between Poe and his wife, Virginia's gradual physical decline due to illness despite her blatant youth, and subsequently, Poe's premature process of ageing during the last years of life as a result of emotional dependence, economic constraints and dissolute habits.

In conclusion, Poe's insistent reluctance to reveal his true age, together with his rapid physical decline, as shown in the letters, personal documents and daguerreotypes taken towards the end of his life, reveal Poe's increasing fear of ageing too fast. Nonetheless, it is the pervasive presence of aged characters in the tales Poe published when he was in his thirties – through which he confronted his own ageing self and actual double – that truly unfolds his increasing concern about growing old, ultimately implying that a reading of his tales featuring old characters would turn Poe's texts into actual confessions of his unconscious but latent fear of ageing prematurely.

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